**PROGRAM NOTES**
by Phillip Huscher

**Frederick Delius**
Died June 10, 1934, Grez-sur-Loing, France.

**A Song of Summer**

Delius composed *A Song of Summer* in 1929 and 1930 with the assistance of Eric Fenby, using material begun in 1918 and intended for a work titled *A Poem of Life and Love*. The first performance was given on September 17, 1931, in London, conducted by Sir Henry J. Wood. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twelve minutes.

In 1928, learning that Frederick Delius had become blind and paralyzed as a result of advancing disease and was unable to compose, Eric Fenby, a young self-taught musician with no reputation, wrote to the composer, offering to serve as his secretary. For the next six years, Fenby worked with Delius at the composer's home near Paris, ultimately enabling him to resume composing, although in a highly unconventional manner. Delius dictated his music in a monotone that Fenby at first found nearly impossible to understand. But eventually they devised a system that worked, and, as a result, Delius turned out six new compositions. As Delius sang each piece into existence, literally note by note, Fenby would shout out the names of every pitch as he wrote it down. Since the process had to be repeated for each individual instrumental line, a full day's work might produce only two or three measures of orchestral music. "Neither of us realized at the time that we were doing something quite extraordinary in musical history," Fenby told the *Chicago Tribune*’s Howard Reich in an interview in 1987. *A Song of Summer* is the final product of this remarkable "collaboration."

Delius is an odd figure in English music. Born in England to German parents, he came into his own as a composer in the United States (while working as an orange grower in Florida, where the pickers' songs drifting across the St. John River profoundly affected him), enjoyed his first taste of success in Germany and Norway, and ultimately settled in rural France. Although he studied for a year and a half at the esteemed Leipzig Conservatory in the late 1880s, Delius always said that he learned everything he needed to know the previous year from his more informal lessons with Thomas Ward, a transplanted New Yorker who lived in Jacksonville. The main benefit of Leipzig apparently was his contact and eventual friendship with Edward Grieg, whose letter to Delius's father convinced him that his son was destined for a career in music.

In the summer of 1888, Delius moved to Paris, where he came to know Fauré and Ravel, artists Gauguin and Munch, and the Scandinavian writer Strindberg; became intoxicated with grand opera; met his future wife, Helene "Jelka" Rosen, a German painter; and contracted the syphilis that would later shut down his career and eventually take his life. Despite his international itinerary, Delius has come to be closely identified with England, a country he rarely visited and later said he hated. Part of his reputation both in his native land and abroad was due to the advocacy of the great British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, who called Delius "the last great apostle of romance, emotion, and beauty in music." Delius's work was almost unknown in England at the time he and Beecham first met, in 1907. (He was just then beginning to make a name for himself in Germany, where several conductors had started playing his compositions.) But in the years that followed, Beecham regularly programmed Delius's pieces (he organized major festivals of his music in 1929 and in 1946). In Beecham, Delius found that he had both a close friend—
they took a month-long walking-tour of Norway together in 1908—and the kind of champion of which most composers can only dream.

In the years immediately after World War II, Delius's health began to decline steadily, as a result of his syphilitic infection. In 1920, Jelka began to take over her husband's correspondence and eventually, when he found it increasingly difficult to hold a pen, she became his copyist as well. As he grew increasingly blind and paralyzed, Delius began to realize that his composing life was over, even though his creativity was at its peak. Then Eric Fenby arrived on the scene. Among Fenby's most pressing tasks were to help Delius return to compositions that he had left unfinished and to rescue music from earlier scores that Delius had found unsatisfactory. *A Song of Summer* is the new work that Fenby and Delius created from the remains of *A Poem of Life and Love*, an orchestral piece which Delius began in 1918 but had been forced to abandon.

When Fenby began to transcribe the unfinished *Poem* into a short score that he and Delius could edit together, he was crestfallen to realize that, although it was filled with lovely passages, "the work might have been written by a student in Delius's manner." Delius was undeterred—by Fenby's assessment or by the task at hand—and he ordered Fenby to "select all the good material" and develop it into a new piece with a new title. Fenby, who had gotten to know Delius so well he could finish his sentences, now was entrusted with completing his music. One day in early August 1929, Delius told Fenby that he had an entirely new opening for the piece. "I want you to imagine that we are sitting on the cliffs in the heather looking out over the sea," he told Fenby, as he began to dictate. "The sustained chords in the high strings suggest the clear sky, and the stillness and calmness of the scene." The next afternoon they went through the new music at the piano, debating every detail, and a day later Delius greeted Fenby with a final instruction: "Write the score out in ink." Two years later, *A Song of Summer* was given its premiere during the 1931 Prom season. It is Delius's last major orchestral work.

A postscript: Eric Fenby died at the age of ninety on February 18, 1997, in Scarborough, England. After Delius's death, he returned to England, where he wrote a memoir, *Delius As I Knew Him*, published in 1936 and later made into a made-for-TV biopic, part of a series of composer biographies directed by Ken Russell, originally broadcast on the BBC arts program Omnibus in 1968. Although he taught composition at the Royal Academy, Fenby destroyed all of his own works, including a symphony, claiming that "only genius matters."

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